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## Identity exploration and development in TESOL teacher education:

### A three-dimensional space narrative inquiry perspective

#### Abstract

This study explores the professional identity development of five non-native Englishspeaking teacher learners from different backgrounds who were studying for a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics/TESOL at an Australian university, following the threedimensional space narrative inquiry framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The study aims to address how identity work could be utilized in teacher education to enrich teacher learners' learning experience and prepare them for better developing their teacher selves. Participants attended two one-hour story-telling sessions aimed to elicit various aspects of their experience within the teacher education program such as native/non-native issues, transition in time and space and changes in expectations, and the learning environment. Their stories, structured and analyzed following the three-dimensional space narrative inquiry framework (*Interaction, Continuity, and Situation*) revealed their growth, satisfaction, and tensions resulting from becoming part of the community of practice in the Australian teacher education program. This research highlights the role of conducting identity exploration interventions within the context of teacher education in assisting TESOL teachers to construct and reconstruct their professional identity. It also suggests classroom activities designed based on the three-dimensional space narrative inquiry framework to make identity work a crucial part of teacher development within teacher education courses.

*Keywords:* teacher identity, TESOL, teacher education, three-dimensional space narrative inquiry

#### 1. Introduction

Recent language teacher identity research has emphasized the role of teacher learning in shaping and enriching language teachers' lives (Aneja, 2016; Trent, 2013; Yazan, 2018;

Zacharias, 2010). Their findings have shown that teacher education programs are favourable contexts for teacher learners to construct and negotiate their identities in line with their learning experiences. This body of research has therefore paved the way for theoretical discussions on how identity work could be incorporated into teacher education to help teacher learners adopt a stronger sense of identity (Yazan, 2019). However, to date little empirical research has evidenced how an exploration of identity within teacher education courses could be made more intentional and effective (see Beijaard, 2019; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). To address this gap, this study explored the identity of five teacher learners from different language backgrounds who were undertaking an MA Applied Linguistics/TESOL program at an Australian university, following the three-dimensional space narrative inquiry framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The study aimed to uncover the impact of such an identity exploration experience on TESOL teacher learners, thereby making a case for integrating identity exploration into teacher education courses.

## **2. Conceptualizing teacher identity**

Teacher identity is often defined as the way individual teachers see themselves in relation to their relationships with their professional setting and the society (Morgan, 2004). It is i) manifested in teachers' self-perception as teaching practitioners; ii) influenced by how teachers are positioned/seen by others; iii) formed and likely inclined to reform through social interaction; iv) dynamic and constantly changing across time and space; and v) evolving as teachers participate in various professional development activities (Yazan, 2018). Teacher identity construction is thus considered as the process of "making sense and interpretation of one's own values and experiences" in teaching and learning to teach (Flores & Day, 2006, p. 220). This conceptualization has led to investigation of teacher identity as it is lived through teachers' practices and involvement in different social and professional memberships (*identity-in-practice*) (Trent, 2013; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). The present study, therefore, takes *identity-in-practice* as the conceptual focus to examine the identity development of English language teachers participating in a teacher education program. Specifically, we interpret teacher identity through the lenses of Wenger's (1998) theory of identity formation in communities of practice, and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

## 2.1. Identity in communities of practice

Wenger's (1998) theory of identity emphasizes learning as a way of becoming, as "learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming" (p. 5). This learning and becoming (hence identity formation) are strongly connected with how one's life is lived day to day in a given community of practice (CoP). A CoP is theorized as a group of people who share the same professional expertise and interest ('a shared repertoire'), and work and interact with each other via sharing knowledge and experience ('mutual engagement') in order to negotiate and achieve common goals ('a joint enterprise') (p. 73). Membership in a CoP is therefore crucial for its participants to develop their identity. Since this study investigated language teachers' identity as they experienced learning in a teacher education program (i.e., a CoP), Wenger's theorization of identity is adopted as a theoretical framework.

Particularly, we draw on Wenger's (1998) conceptualization of identity as '*participation and non-participation*' and '*modes of belonging*' in communities of practice (p. 164, 173). Regarding participation, what an individual chooses to participate in (participation) reveals as much about themselves as what they choose not to (nonparticipation). Additionally, members of a CoP often start with an identity of *non-* or *peripheral participation* to gain entry into a job (i.e., learning procedures to complete tasks without a required thorough understanding of why). Full participation may be achieved once members become more experienced and/or are given access to better understandings of the job.

'Identity as belonging' offers further insight into teacher learners' experience. Wenger (1998) identifies three modes of belonging: *engagement* (participation, interactions, and relationships that take place within a community); *alignment* (degree of compliance and coordination exercised to achieve a joint enterprise), and *imagination* (building images of themselves and the profession across time and space). The interaction of these modes of belonging help members to form different kinds of *identification* and *negotiation* with their CoPs, thus constructing their identity. *Identification* refers to how the three modes of belonging are exercised to enable identity realization and formation. *Negotiation* is "the ability, facility, and legitimacy to contribute to, take responsibility for, and shape the meanings that matter within a social configuration" (p. 197), and is thus considered as a driving force behind the formation of new identities. For this study, these modes of

participation and belonging form the basis to analyze the participatory characteristics and identity formation of TESOL teacher learners.

## **2.2. Identity as social group membership**

Despite its usefulness, Wenger's theory of identity does not consider social structures and power relations within groups and in the broader society (Barton & Tusting, 2005). As power relations form an important part of teachers' professional lives (Luke, 2004), the current research employs social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) as an additional critical lens to cast light on aspects of teachers' identity that are shaped by their identification and/or negotiation with certain social group memberships. According to social identity theory, one's identity is constructed through their membership in social categories formed by society (gender, class, etc.), which are interconnected in terms of power and status. Therefore, one's levels of identification with certain social categories will affect their sense of self. In the case of TESOL teachers, social identity theory is arguably beneficial for reflecting the commonly cited social categories of 'native-English-speaking teachers' (NESTs) and 'non-nativeEnglish-speaking teachers' (NNESTs) (Varghese et al., 2005). Although this binary view has been severely critiqued for its ideological depowerment of TESOL teachers (Holliday, 2006; Kamhi-Stein, 2016), and for limiting critical investigations into teacher identity (Rudolph, Yazan & Rudolph, 2019), many TESOL teachers might still identify with it.

## **2.3. Identity of second language teacher learners**

Research on TESOL teacher learners' identity has mainly explored and revealed their identification and negotiation with the NESTs/NNESTs social categories. Park (2012) and Aneja (2016) found that experience in US TESOL programs helped teacher learners become more confident about their non-nativeness, which led them to reconsider their linguistic identity and its impact on their identity as English teachers. Similarly, the identity of East Asian teachers of English in a US-based MA TESOL program in Zacharias (2010) was documented as multiple, situated, and shifted following exposure to learning materials and discussions on critical topics such as native/non-nativeness. Trent (2013) and Yazan (2017) also documented how TESOL teacher learners constructed their identity through: (i) interaction with each other and teachers at their placement schools, and (ii) their understanding and beliefs about English education while learning about action research and

during teaching practicum. These studies collectively show that teacher education programs provide a fertile ground for teacher learners to form and develop their teacher selves. Their findings highlight the need to integrate identity-related content and activities as an empowering component into language teacher education. What remains unresolved, however, is how a focus on identity could be realized in teacher education courses.

#### **2.4. Incorporating identity work into language teacher education**

Despite being an essential process that most teacher learners experience, identity construction “may not always be an explicit part of the teacher development plan” (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 185). In response to this claim, some teacher educators have incorporated in their courses elements of critical pedagogy to encourage teacher learners to adopt a more critical view of themselves and the profession (Park, 2012; Abednia, 2012). Much more effort, however, is needed to direct more overt attention to identity exploration as an important component of teacher learning and development at not just course but also program level (Kanno & Stuart, 2011). Specifically, Yazan (2019) suggests using critical autoethnographic narratives, or teacher-generated accounts of identity development, in teacher education courses to encourage language teachers to actively explore their identity. Along this line, the current study reported on an identity-exploration intervention following Connelly and Clandinin’s (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, and examined its impact on teacher learners’ identity development.

#### **2.5. Teacher identity through a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space**

Narrative inquiry, which utilizes lived stories (narratives), has increasingly been employed to study experiences (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014). Specifically, for narrative inquiry to cover multiple aspects of participants’ life experiences, Connelly and Clandinin (2000) suggest exploring experience from three dimensions (hence ‘three-dimensional narrative inquiry space’) including *interaction*, *continuity* or *temporality*, and *situation*. *Interaction*, conceptualized as the link between personal and social factors of experience, involves sharing life experiences through which the story-teller looks *inward* to their feelings, hopes, and desires, and *outward* to existential environments. *Continuity* or *temporality* involves looking *backward* to earlier experiences, connecting them with current happenings, and looking *forward* to the future and experiences that might be implied or anticipated. *Situation* concerns locations in the storyteller’s geographical spaces that provide added meaning to the stories

being told. Given its analyticality and comprehensiveness, this study employed the threedimensional narrative inquiry space as a methodological tool to guide and interpret teacher learners' identity stories. The study addresses two research questions.

1. How do teacher learners attending a TESOL teacher education program construct their professional identity?
2. How does involvement in identity exploration following the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space framework contribute to negotiating their teacher selves?

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1. Participants**

Participants were five teacher learners (four females and one male). At the time of the research, they were in their third (also final) semester in a Master of Applied Linguistics/TESOL program at an Australian university (see Table 1).

*Include Table 1 about here.*

The Australian Applied Linguistics/TESOL program offered coursework covering several aspects of applied linguistics and English language teaching, including introductory linguistics; research methods; testing and assessment; second language (L2) acquisition; and teaching methodologies, focusing on issues surrounding teaching English as an international language (EIL) (e.g., critical discussions on 'Standard English', English varieties, culture in EIL). A majority of students in the program were from Asia, Latin America, and Europe, with a few domestic Australian students studying part-time. Students had various degrees of experience in teaching English or another L2. Faculty members had a PhD in Applied Linguistics/TESOL, and were from various first language backgrounds.

#### **3.2. Data collection and analysis**

This study followed the story-telling path of narrative inquiry research (cf. *living stories*) (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). Each participant attended two audio-recorded semi-structured story-telling sessions (60 minutes each). The participants were guided toward sharing about various aspects of their experience in the teacher education program. The first session elicited stories about their professional experience, focusing on their self-perception as English language teachers *before* and *during* their study in Australia. The second session (two weeks



later) explored how they imagined themselves as language professionals in their home countries *after* finishing the study program. In this session, they were also asked to reflect on their participation in the story-telling sessions. Additionally, the participants were purposefully prompted to reflect on the *interactive*, *continuous*, and *situated* aspects of their experiences.

Data analysis followed a general thematic approach, categorized as ‘analysis of narratives’ (Barkhuizen et al., 2014), comprising five main stages: transcribing interview data, constructing narrative texts from the transcribed data and field texts, sending stories to the participants for comments, coding individual stories and grouping codes into categories, and conducting cross-story analyses and identifying emerging themes (Murray, 2009). The construction of narrative texts followed Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space framework. The coding procedure was done both inductively and deductively at two levels to benefit from existing literature and allow for emergence of themes. The initial coding involved reading through the stories and highlighting segments relevant to participants’ identity development based on key issues identified in the literature (e.g., native/non-nativeness, participation and belonging in the teacher education program). As a second level coding, we read each narrative text and gave labels to the segments. Most of the labels came from the literature while new codes were also created.

### **3.3. Researcher positionality**

Throughout the participants’ story construction, we functioned as both insiders and outsiders. We used to participate in the same TESOL program attended by the participants, and subsequently became tutors in this program. Thus, we were familiar with the courses, their objectives, and how teaching and learning were implemented in this context. This familiarity provided us with an insider view to elicit and understand the participants’ stories. None of the participants, however, were our immediate or past students during data collection. We established a friendly relationship with them through various academic and social gatherings within the program. This allowed us to adopt an outsider view and foster open discussions about several aspects of their learning and experiences.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Narrative accounts of teacher identity

Since the participants constantly went backward and forward in time to reflect on their identity construction, their narratives are organized according to the *Continuity* dimension of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space: a) when participants were English teachers in their home countries (*looking backward*); b) when they were teacher learners in the Australian TESOL program (*looking inward and outward*); and c) their imagined self-images when returning home (*looking forward*). Aspects of *interaction* and *situation* are also interwoven in each time frame.

#### **Before coming to Australia: Individual portraits**

**Andrea.** Andrea described herself as a responsible, methodical, and self-demanding teacher. She was especially interested in finding reasons for the teaching techniques she used in class, reasoning that it would enhance her professional competence. Andrea was very confident about her English; however, she struggled with adopting a favorable English accent. She admitted feeling pressured when working with native English-speaking colleagues at her home institution. In coming to Australia for a master's degree, Andrea desired to adopt an Australian accent and improve her pedagogical knowledge and skills.

**Lan.** Lan described her first year of teaching as both challenging and rewarding. After experiencing difficulties as a novice teacher (e.g., dealing with teaching materials and establishing her teaching style), Lan gradually felt more confident and started to enjoy teaching. She was also interested in sounding native-like. Her goals in coming to Australia for higher education were to improve her English skills and benefit from a developed education system.

**Ken.** Unlike Andrea and Lan, Ken was less confident with his English since English teaching was his second career choice. His ideal image of an English teacher was one who has native-like English abilities, as he claimed that in Japan many students would prefer 'native' English teachers to Japanese teachers. Additionally, as a 'second-career' English teacher, he felt his professional knowledge was insufficient. His study goals were to enhance his English skills and gain more understanding of language teaching theories and practice.

**Grace.** Like Ken, Grace did not have much formal education in TESOL. She mostly taught based on her English learning experience, especially the one-and-a-half year when she took intensive English courses in England. Grace also insisted on having a native-like accent,

explaining that Korean students and their parents highly value nativeness. Grace's main purposes for pursuing a higher degree abroad were to improve her English and her teaching knowledge and skills, thus enriching her career prospects.

**Joyce.** Having the most extensive teaching experience, Joyce appeared to be a confident teacher. Her account revealed that she was loved by her teenage students for her effective teaching and friendly personality. Joyce was also highly regarded by the school principal for her teaching outcomes, reporting that her students usually achieved good grades in exams. She was confident about her English and teaching skills, and was happy with her teaching life.

From these portraits, a common theme underlying the teachers' self-images prior to further education was that of self-perfection regarding English competence. They emphasized on having a good command of English, and even explicitly expressed preference for nativelike competence (Jenkins, 2005; Nguyen, 2017). Their self-identification with the social category of NNESTs based on their linguistic identity (Varghese et al., 2005) demonstrates submission to the native-speaker ideologies. This adopted and un-negotiated identity at this point, interestingly, was one of the main factors that motivated them to pursue further education.

The participants' different levels of participation and ways of belonging in the CoP of English teachers in their respective contexts revealed other aspects of their identity. While Andrea, Lan, and Joyce showed *full participation* through establishing themselves as competent English teachers, Ken and Grace seemed to experience *peripheral participation* as they mostly taught based on their previous learning experience without a full understanding of language teaching principles. This is largely due to their lack of confidence and pedagogical knowledge as second-career English teachers (Trent & Gao, 2009). Nonetheless, all the participants exhibited active *engagement* as they reported to interact well with their students and enjoyed their teaching. Also, their desire to improve their English competence, especially their spoken English, evidenced *alignment* to the requirements and expectations of their home CoPs. They, therefore, *imagined* a future CoP in the Australian TESOL program where they could achieve their goals of enhancing both their English and teaching knowledge and skills. These multiple identity factors formed their desire to pursue further studies in Australia, and were also sources of conflicts and contradictions.

## **Teacher images after coming to Australia: Negotiated identities**

### ***Encountering difficulties in coursework***

Each participant faced several difficulties as they initially entered a new CoP: the Australian TESOL program. The most common challenge was to adapt to a different academic culture. Looking back at their first semester, Joyce, Ken, Lan, and Grace admitted struggling with several types of coursework as they were not previously familiar with the conventions of academic writing and presentations. Ken explained:

#### **Excerpt 1**

*In Japan we don't have to do a lot of presentations in class, so I had many difficulties making presentations and participating in discussions. Also, I had never written 2000word essays before, so it was tough. (Ken, Interview 1)*

Ken's comment shows that he was under pressure to learn new practices in the teacher education program. Likewise, Grace recalled herself bursting into tears when receiving her first written assignment with a very low mark and a comment that her essay was colloquially written and not properly structured. Both Ken's apprehension of new learning tasks and Grace's reaction to her assignment results demonstrate their peripheral participation as newcomers learning to become acquainted with different tasks characterizing a new CoP (Wenger, 1998).

When discussing the cause of these difficulties, the participants mostly cited their 'nonnativeness'. After having a hard time completing course tasks, Ken admitted adopting a clearer sense of being 'a Japanese learning to teach English in an English-dominant environment'. This feeling of deficiency made him even more insecure than before. Similarly, Joyce found it contradictory that while she had always considered herself a competent English teacher in China, she became less confident as a teacher learner in Australia because of her 'poor' English abilities.

#### **Excerpt 2**

*I was very confident as an English teacher in China. But here I had to do lots of things in English, especially coursework, and I began to realize my English wasn't good enough, or even poor. (Joyce, Interview 1)*

Clearly, problems in dealing with coursework triggered the participants' self-identification with the social identity of being NNESTs, which contradicted their previously established identity as 'competent English teachers'.

### ***Experiencing professional growth***

Despite difficulties, gains and growth were a major part of the teachers' narratives as they engaged and aligned more with practices of the teacher education program. They acknowledged significant gains in their knowledge of principles behind several teaching methods that they were already familiar with. Andrea, for example, was pleased to be able to understand theories behind using group work.

#### **Excerpt 3**

*Previously I organized group work, thinking it was fun and interactive; now I understand more deeply how interaction can facilitate learning. (Andrea, Interview 1)*

Andrea's confession indicates a transition in participation, where she went from simply following teaching practices (peripheral participation) to fully understanding reasons for these practices (full participation).

A sense of empowerment was felt most strongly in Ken and Grace who, as secondcareer English teachers, were previously doubtful about their qualification. They stated that the broadening knowledge and understanding of various language teaching issues gained through the program helped enhanced their professional self-esteem.

Notably, the participants were greatly influenced by the recognition of English varieties introduced in the program. Before taking these courses they allegedly thought varieties of English included British, American, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand English, and were unaware that other variations of English were also recognized.

#### **Excerpt 4**

*Before the course I had completely no idea about International English. To me only the inner circle existed... It was like seeing the world with somebody else's eyes. (Andrea, Interview 1)*

This realization of the pluricentricity of English shows the participants' increased engagement with current ideologies in TESOL, which in turn challenges their previously adopted identity as less competent 'non-native English teachers'. Consequently, while the participants were quite insistent on having native-like English competence before, this idea became less rigid to them, especially to Ken and Joyce, who stated that they wanted to maintain their Japanese and Chinese ways of speaking English. Ken admitted changing his view on 'good English', reaffirming that "There's nothing wrong about people knowing that

I'm Japanese from the way I speak English". Andrea, similarly, became disengaged with her original desire to adopt an Australian accent, and decided to "speak English intelligibly in [her] own way". Paradoxically, Grace and Lan, despite realizing the deficiency of following the native-like model as a result of the coursework experience, still maintained their wish to use English like a 'native'. They confessed feeling divided in this matter, reflecting a constantly negotiated linguistic identity.

Alongside knowledge gains, the participants acknowledged that interacting with their lecturers and other peers within the TESOL program contributed significantly to their professional growth. They enjoyed interacting with their lecturers and considered the teacherstudent relationship a highlight of their education. Joyce appreciated the non-hierarchical relationship between teachers and students in the program. Similarly, Andrea commented,

Excerpt 5

*For my long-term professional development it's what I've learnt from working with the teachers here that strikes me most. I think I will be a different teacher from what I used to be because of them. (Andrea, Interview 2)*

Andrea's remark demonstrates a high level of engagement and alignment with the CoP of the TESOL program, particularly with the teachers she interacted with. This strong level of identification seemingly exerted a substantial impact on her teacher self.

Furthermore, the teacher learners were surprised to find that many courses were taught by non-native English teacher educators, as they had expected that all their lecturers would be 'native' speakers of English. Through increased professional contact, they began to realize the strengths of these 'non-native' educators in terms of professional knowledge and relatable experience.

Excerpt 6

*After the first few classes, I realized non-native instructors could be as good as native ones. They offer unique aspects about teaching English and share interesting experiences. I can relate to what they say (Lan, Interview 2).*

Admittedly, experiences with non-native lecturers seemed instrumental to enriching the quality of interaction within the teacher education program, as well as contributing to further negotiation and appreciation of the participants' non-native identity.

The teacher learners also felt comfortable interacting with their classmates. Grace and Lan found it advantageous that the program enrolled a large number of international students with whom they shared several commonalities in English teaching and learning. Likewise, Ken and Joyce enjoyed working on assignments and communicating with fellow students from various cultures and professional backgrounds. Andrea anticipated staying in contact with her classmates to share their teaching experiences even after graduation.

To summarize, in *looking inward* and *outward* at their experiences within the teacher education program, the participants experienced shifts in their professional identity. They transitioned from being confident about their English abilities as competent English teachers in their home countries, to feeling less secure about their English proficiency when initially faced with difficulties in their studies. This change in *situation* appeared to challenge their linguistic identity. As the courses proceeded, however, these teacher learners gradually regained their confidence because of their increasing *engagement* and *participation* in the program and strong *alignment* with the professional ideologies and practices promoted within this community (e.g., understanding principles behind teaching practices, appreciation of English as an international language, embracement of non-nativeness). Also, increased professional knowledge and interaction with teachers and peers in an internationalized CoP (Yazan, 2017; Zacharias, 2010) apparently enriched their learning experience and contributed to forming their identity.

### **Imagining future teacher selves: Looking forward**

As the participants were in their last semester of study, they started thinking about returning to their previous workplaces after graduation. This forward-looking process revealed conflicts and negotiation in their imagined teacher images. Overall, uncertainty and apprehension prevailed. Both Andrea and Joyce predicted that their colleagues and students might expect them to ‘know better’ and ‘do better’.

#### **Excerpt 7**

*If I go back to teach, my colleagues may want to observe my class and comment on my lessons. I think many of them are curious to see if my teaching improves. (Joyce, Interview 2)*

These predictions arguably project the participants’ imagined images as further educated teachers returning to their home contexts, potentially preparing to adopt a renewed teacher identity.

Notably, the participants were concerned about how to apply what they acquired from the Australian teacher education program to their home teaching contexts. Despite excitement about returning, they recognized potential obstacles, most of which had to do with constraints in how English teaching is conducted in their home countries. Andrea anticipated possible challenges in her home situation, as she may find herself “*want[ing] to change a lot of things, but I won’t be able to*”. However, the teacher learners were optimistic that they would at least be able to create changes in their classroom. Andrea took the idea of appreciation of English varieties as an example of dealing with anticipated difficulties.

Excerpt 8

*I think we’ll have to adapt anyway, but we’ll fight mostly. Chances are I won’t be able to convince my coordinator to hire a very good Mexican English teacher that has a strong Mexican accent, but the things that happen in my classroom will happen because I decide them to happen that way. (Andrea, Interview 2)*

This excerpt represents a mixture of excitement, apprehension, and determination in Andrea’s and other participants’ narratives as they projected their future teacher images. The imagined shift back to the home context seemed to have provoked intricate thoughts that reveal the complexity of these teachers’ identity. They were able to establish themselves as better and more confident teachers as a result of further education. However, they anticipated ‘fights’ with their home education systems in regard to their teaching practice. Following Wenger’s (1998) modes of belonging, these imaginations are likely to motivate these teachers to practice new ways of engagement and alignment with their home CoPs, thus forming new identities as returned teachers.

#### **4.2. Exploring identity in teacher education**

The benefits of participating in identity-focused story-telling sessions following the threedimensional narrative inquiry space framework could be summarized into the following themes: useful implementation of reflective practice, realization of self-development, and clearer vision of and better preparation for future teaching.

The participants considered the conversations with the researchers a fruitful opportunity to reflect on their past, current, and future teacher images and their learning expectations. For Andrea, these conversations made her realize which of her learning goals



had been met, which had not, and why. Grace, similarly, commented on the benefit of verbalizing her thoughts and sharing her study experience.

Excerpt 9

*I've been so overwhelmed with my study and life in a new country that I didn't have time to reflect on what I originally wanted to achieve from this experience. I'm glad I've had these conversations! (Grace, Interview 2)*

Grace seemed to appreciate sharing about her teaching life in her home country and her Australian study experience. Without this opportunity, her thoughts on her self-development throughout this learning journey might have remained unexplored.

The participants also commented on the usefulness of being encouraged to do their reflection from multiple dimensions. Lan explained,

Excerpt 10

*It's great that you [the researcher] asked me about the past, present, and future, and encouraged me to recall critical incidents happening within each stage. I was able to connect these events together to have a clearer picture of what I have done and achieved in the past year studying here. (Lan, Interview 2)*

Lan's comment demonstrates the usefulness of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space in guiding the participants to systematically review and evaluate their development over time and through different spaces.

Reflecting on their Australian study experience subsequently led the teacher learners to see more clearly their learning achievements and how they affected their self-perception. Ken was able to review his teaching knowledge and skills and realized how his teaching beliefs had changed.

Excerpt 11

*I didn't know my beliefs had changed that significantly until all these talks. For example, I used to desire native-like English competence, and set that as a goal for my students. Now I won't do that anymore. (Ken, Interview 2)*

Ken's realization shows the power of story-telling on making explicit teachers' thinking, beliefs, and knowledge, thereby providing insight into their sense of self.

Finally, the participants acknowledged that being prompted to visualize their teacher selves after finishing the courses forced them to think hard and be more prepared for the future. For Joyce, talking about returning home was beneficial.

Excerpt 12

*I was excited to go home and teach with renewed perspectives, but was unsure how I might be able to fit back in the home context. It was very helpful to be able to put my thoughts into words and have a listener. (Joyce, Interview 2)*

The opportunity to verbalize concerns about an imagined situation seemed to be reassuring to Joyce. Andrea also realized that taking part in the two story-telling sessions motivated her to contemplate on her overall study experience and obtain a clearer sense of her shifting identity.

Excerpt 13

*I enjoyed the conversations. They pushed me to look back at the teacher I was before I came to Australia, and see for myself the kind of teacher I am now and will be in the future as a result of all this education. (Andrea, Interview 2)*

Lan even expressed keenness to have more opportunities to share her learning experience with her fellow classmates to extend their discussion.

Excerpt 14

*Perhaps we should hold reflective conversations like this among ourselves more, as when my classmates and I meet we often just talk about assignments and courses. (Lan, Interview 2)*

Lan's suggestion signifies the potential impact of involvement in identity-focused conversations on enriching the quality of interaction in teacher education programs. It also suggests that identity conversations could be extended to take place not only between teacher educators and teacher learners, but also among teacher learners.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1. Teachers' negotiated social identity**

The participants' perceptions about their English competence and their constant desire to improve it before and during the teacher education program reinforce the dominance of social identity determined by language backgrounds (i.e., native/non-native) among ESOL teachers (Ellis, 2016; Richards, 2017). The participants expected that attending overseas TESOL courses would help them improve their English, or even approach native-likeness. They unquestioningly assumed the identity of NNESTs who were competent users of English but still eager to perfect their language competence (Jenkins, 2005). This self-identification is not

surprising, given that the binary native/non-native view of language teachers has been perpetuated by numerous discourses that value an idealized ‘nativeness’ (Aneja, 2016).

However, as they were immersed in the teacher education program, the participants’ identity was constantly negotiated (Trent, 2017). They realized that it was neither realistic nor necessary to reach native-like competence following exposure to several critical issues in TESOL in their courses, especially the recognition of English as an international language. Joyce and Ken therefore wanted to project their national identity as Chinese and Japanese when using English, similar to Vietnamese participants in Phan’s (2007) study. Andrea, likewise, found herself not wanting to adopt an Australian accent as she originally planned to. Nevertheless, Grace and Lan, while turning away from the idealized image of the native speaker, still kept their desire to perfect their English (Nguyen, 2017). These varied negotiation trajectories in relation to linguistic identity demonstrate that language is “a site of struggle where subjectivity and individual consciousness are produced” (Pavlenko, p. 54). More importantly, they reflect the participants’ critical and meaningful reconsideration of membership in the NNESTs category, which arguably was the result of their participation in the teacher education program. In this respect, the teachers’ negotiated social identity seems to have critically intersected with their professional identity, contributing to a renewed teacher identity. Although it may be premature to claim that these teachers were able to liberate themselves from identification with nativeness, this identity reconstruction provides additional support for engaging TESOL teacher learners in critically examining the native/non-native dichotomy beyond a binary perspective (Rudolph et al., 2019), thus enabling them to exercise more criticality when adopting a social identity category.

## **5.2. Identity reinforced through participation in communities of practice**

The participants revealed their identity most clearly in their different levels of participation and modes of belonging in multiple CoPs. The CoP of the Australian teacher education program presented them with both challenges and opportunities that affected their identity construction. They initially experienced difficulties adjusting to a new academic culture due mainly to unfamiliarity with teaching and learning styles. This finding is not uncommon among research on study-abroad students (Wu & Hammond, 2011); however, for the teachers in the current study, this *peripheral* participation at an earlier stage challenged their previously adopted identity as competent teachers (Jackson, 2017). As the courses

progressed, more *active* participation (Wenger, 1998) appeared to positively affect their self-perception. This includes their *engagement with* course contents and *in* interaction with peers who shared similar professional backgrounds and learning goals, and meaningful connection with course lecturers. Also, *alignment* with professional knowledge and ideologies promoted in the program helped enhance Ken and Grace's self-confidence as second-career English teachers. Apparently, a sense of belonging to a supportive teaching and learning community was crucial to reinforcing a strong and favorable teacher identity (Trent, 2013; Yazan, 2017).

Other CoPs featured quite strongly in the participants' narratives are their home institutions and local teaching contexts. Before commencing further education, they expressed strong *alignment* with the culture and practices of these communities (e.g., acceptance of the local preference for nativeness). Toward the end of their study, however, their imagined returning-home teacher images were fraught with apprehension and uncertainty. In their narratives they referred to themselves and the Australian teacher education program as "us"/"we"/"here", and their colleagues and the home institutions as "them"/"they"/"there". The shift in geographical spaces seemed to enable them to visualize possible tensions between what they were taught about TESOL and the reality of their teaching contexts, thereby adopting a new identity of empowered returned teachers. These anticipated constraints did not, however, prevent them from desiring to apply and adapt what they learned in TESOL education to their local CoPs. This finding demonstrates the power of teachers having a strong sense of their professional worth and solid beliefs in what they can and should do in the classroom. The knowledge and experience gained from the teacher education program appeared instrumental to compromising these teacher learners' self-perception, thereby strengthening their teacher identity (Beijaard, 2019).

#### **5.4. Role of identity exploration in constructing teacher identity**

This research speaks to the importance of exploring teacher identity within teacher education and provides insight into this process. The participants' reflections on their participation in the story-telling sessions show that explicitly reflecting and discussing their development as an English teacher was a useful exercise. It urged them to reflect on and keep track of their own professional development, as well as think about their teaching prospects. These findings demonstrate that identity exploration is both a reflective and experiential process (Farrell,

2016). More importantly, they confirm that identity work can contribute to teacher development in powerful ways (Yazan, 2019).

Moreover, the interactions between the researchers and the participants seemed to motivate the participants to more eagerly verbalize their thoughts and thus reveal their identity. All participants refer to the story-telling sessions as ‘conversations’, implying that they considered these sessions as fruitful dialogic talks. One participant (Lan, Excerpt 14) even suggested having similar ‘identity conversations’ with her peers to deepen their discussion. This demonstrates the role of social interaction in fostering identity development (Gray & Morton, 2018).

Throughout this identity exploration process, the three-dimensional narrative inquiry framework proved effective to guide the teacher learners toward self-investigating their professional identity. Their stories were characterized by all three aspects of the narrative inquiry space, including the shift in living and learning contexts (*situation*), relationship with peers and teachers in the program (*interaction*), and connection with previous and future learning, teaching, and life experiences (*continuity*). These characteristics reinforce the situated, interactive, and continuative features of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry framework in investigating lived experiences.

## **6. Conclusion: Implications for TESOL teacher education**

Among various ways that identity exploration could be made central to teacher education content and delivery, we propose employing the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space framework in designing learning activities for teacher learners. This may include program-long tasks such as having teacher learners keep a teaching portfolio to reflect on their learning experience. This portfolio could be divided into sections based on dimensions of the narrative inquiry space. Regarding *Continuity/Temporality* and *Situation*, teacher learners could write short paragraphs to (i) describe themselves as teachers/teachers-to-be prior to entering the program, (ii) reflect on their learning gains throughout the program and make connection as to how their learning might influence their self-perception, and (iii) project their teaching life after completing the courses. Other sections of the portfolio might focus on the *Interaction* dimension, where teacher learners reflect on their relationship and interaction with their peers, teachers, and future students as they gradually integrate into the teacher education program. At the individual course level, identity exploration could be embedded in

writing tasks which ask teacher learners to reflect on their learning in a TESOL subject matter following the three narrative inquiry dimensions and connect this learning with their identity development. For this task, the ‘narrative frame’ (Barkhuizen & Wett, 2008), which essentially involves providing a template for articulating thoughts, could be utilized to guide teacher learners toward generating their own learning stories (Appendix A).

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## Appendix A.

An identity-oriented task used in a teacher education course  
on second language acquisition (SLA)

### Reflect on your beliefs about an aspect of SLA.

The most significant change in my beliefs about aspects of SLA discussed in the course is .....

.....

Before taking this SLA course, this was what I thought about this issue

.....

.....

My current thinking about this issue is .....

.....

I think the reasons for these differences in my thinking are .....

.....

Working with course materials has influenced my thinking in the following ways:

.....

.....

Discussion/interaction with my classmates and the course teacher has influenced my thinking in the following ways:

.....

.....

This change in thinking will be helpful/not helpful for my future teaching because .....

.....

.....

This change in thinking might influence how I see myself as an English teacher in the following ways:

.....

.....

TABLE 1

Participants' background information

Pseudonyms	Country of origin	Age	Undergraduate major	Teaching experience (year)	Teaching location and level
Andrea	Chile	28	English education	5	Private institution; teenagers and adults
Joyce	China	35	English education	11	High school
Ken	Japan	36	Economics	6	High school

Grace	Korea	31	Business	5	Private language center; adults
Lan	Vietnam	25	English education	1	Public university

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